

## Acts 17:22-31

Paul is on his second missionary Journey. He has been to Philippi, Thessalonica, and finally to Athens, which is the leading city in Greece. It is most likely the leading city for pagan culture, and filled with temptation. Athens was a large city that had a lot to offer. It could offer a little bit of everything, use your imagination. Paul came to Athens to proclaim the Gospel. He would preach in the local synagogue, which was a common practice for him, and then he moved out into the marketplace where he preached day by day, and finally the local philosophers invited him to speak and share his teachings at the Areopagus.

The Areopagus is both a place and a group of people. It is a small rocky hill known today as Mars Hill. It was also one of the most important and prestigious council of elders in the history of Athens. This group of elders met on this site and were called Areopagus, and it consisted of nine chief magistrates who led the city away from the rule of a king and laid the foundation for Greece's democracy. Over the years the Areopagus changed and by the time Paul came around it was a court where criminals were tried, laws developed, philosophies and laws were decreed. The Areopagus was where this group of philosophers would gather. This group was mostly upper class men who had a plethora of knowledge and always wanted to learn more, they always wanted more. So, they heard about this guy who had been teaching in the synagogue and the marketplace, and he was teaching something different, something they hadn't heard before, it was new. Paul had been preaching about Jesus the Christ and sharing the Good News. The philosophers wanted to hear what Paul had to say, so they invited him to speak at the Areopagus.

Paul was not naïve, he knew who this group was and what their intentions were for inviting him to speak to them. They didn't invite Paul because of his wonderful use of words or elegant speaking ability. No, they simply found his religion, what he was teaching to be interesting and wanted to hear it for themselves. In this time period, 90-100 AD they were worshipping many different gods. They believe that the world was run by gods and that there was a god who made it rain, made the crops grow, and if something bad happened it was because they did something that displeased one of the gods. They believed and worship many different gods and the philosophers thought there is always room for one more. The philosophers thought they would hear about this god Paul was talking about, because there's always room for one more. If they did not learn anything, at least nothing else it would be amusing and they can get a laugh out of him.

Paul knew why he had been invited to the Areopagus. He was a lot smarter than they gave him credit for. He knew who he was speaking to and he chose his words wisely, but faithfully.

When we read Paul's opening lines of his speech it is hard to tell if he is being sincere or facetious. "I can see that you are very religious because I saw several of your objects of worship and even found an altar for unknown god." They most likely view themselves as very religious because of all the gods they worship. Some people think that Paul is being facetious, and he's getting a laugh on their expense. Maybe he did, but I think we can get something from Paul's words. The people of Athens are religious and they are continuously searching for a new god that will fill that void and will provide

them with truth. There are religious because they know that there is something else out there that they need so they are searching for it.

Paul had been wandering around the city taking in the sites, a temple for this god, an altar for that god, a statue of another god here, and then he comes across an altar made for an “unknown god.” Unlike other gods, they didn’t know an attributes of this god so they could not make a statue because they didn’t know what this god looked like or what this god could do. They knew nothing about this god, but did acknowledge this god. Paul started his speech by mentioning the altar to this “unknown god” because it was something that these philosophers were familiar with. Paul was coming to them and talking about something that was real to them, it was part of there lives. Paul could have come in and started rattling off scriptures from the Old Testament, and immediately start preaching about the Son of God, but they did know the scriptures and they did know who the resurrected Jesus was. Paul met them where they were.

Paul brings up the altar to this “unknown god” and he says “you know in your searching for gods, you have come across the God I proclaim, you just didn’t know it. This unknown god you talk about, that you have acknowledged exists is the God who caused all things to come into existence. The God who created all things and has given you life, this God is the Creator of heaven and earth.” Paul even quotes a pagan poet, one that they would have been familiar with “In him we live and move and have our being. We are his offspring.” We are created in God’s image. Paul continues to tell them about his God, the God they have found. He tells them that the God who made the world and everything in it does not live in temple. God is not served by human hands and doesn’t need anything from us, because our breath and life comes from the Creator. God created humanity with the expectation that we would search for God and that we would reach out to God, even though God is not far from each one of us, God wants to be in relationship with us. We are created to be in relationship with God, to know our Creator.

In the last couple of years, since I have moved to the Chicago area, when I visit with my friends from high school and college some of them ask me, “Do you know Oprah?” or “Do you know Barack Obama?” My response is always “I don’t know them but I know of them.” There is a difference between knowing someone and knowing of them. Paul points out that the men of Athens knew of God, but did not know God. They did know the God that was revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. They didn’t know the God that was revealed through Jesus Christ.... But they were searching for something, they new they need something else and that these other gods weren’t efficient enough, they need one more.

Even today we have people searching, searching for something else to fill that void in their life. I think there are two kinds of searchers. One is someone like the philosophers who haven’t read or heard scriptures and don’t know anything about God. They might believe that there is a higher power out there, but they can’t name it, it’s unknown. They have not experienced God through Scripture. Since they don’t know the God of the Scriptures they may not realize that God, the Creator, is right there before them.

The second kind of searcher is someone who has read and heard scriptures. God has been revealed to them through the Holy Bible. They might even attend church regularly and go to Bible study, and attend Sunday School. They might even have the fish on the back of their car. Even though they have read the scriptures and know what God has

done, they are still searching for something more. Just because someone knows of God doesn't mean they know God.

What do we have to do to know someone? We can't claim to know someone just because we read about them. I read about Barack Obama all the time, but I don't know him, I don't have any kind of relationship with him. To get to know a person we have to interact with them in some way or another, over the phone, email, face to face, talking to them. We have to experience them in some way. We have to share an experience with them to really get to know them... In order to know God, we have to experience God and God is "not far from each one of us."

God has been revealed to us, here on earth in many ways. We read scripture and learn how God has been revealed. We can hear about how other people have personally experienced God. We can experience God ourselves, through prayer and meditation, worship, Bible study, or by viewing the beauty of creation of the mountains, the oceans, or the stars in the sky. We can experience God through the eyes of another person, or a simple gesture of kindness.

The clearest way God has been revealed is through Jesus Christ. We have chosen and committed our lives to follow Jesus. We have promised that we will get to know God, build that relationship, through Jesus, who is God on earth. We have promised to in relationship with God. We have promised to know God.

You may know someone who is searching and doesn't know of God,.. yet. There maybe some searchers here today that know of God, but just haven't reached out and grab hold of God's hand. There are some here today that aren't searching anymore and know God, but desire to be in closer relationship with God... Do you know of God? Do you know God? Do you have a desire to be in an interment relationship with God? Reach out, "God is not far from each one of us."